

Time is now to speak on bullet train
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The Fresno Bee

I'd always thought of high-speed rail as a great idea that might never move down the tracks in car-loving California. In fact, I figured I'd be throwing batting practice to my great-grandchildren before there were 200-mph trains whisking people between Los Angeles and the Bay Area and connecting the central San Joaquin Valley to the rest of the state -- if we had high-speed rail at all. Until a few years ago, bullet trains were easy targets. Fine for countries without room or money to build freeways, critics said, but certainly not for us. Besides, why would anyone take a train when it's much easier to fly? But day-and-night traffic jams, polluted air and the rising cost of air travel have enhanced high-speed rail's appeal. What was pie-in-the-sky now appears to be California's and the central San Joaquin Valley's transportation salvation. "High-speed rail is essential to the state and the Valley," says Larry Miller, a Council of Fresno Governments rail committee member. "It means billions of dollars of employment and billions of dollars of prosperity." Too bad the state is so broke legislators likely will put off seeking voter approval until 2006 -- or later -- for \$9.95 billion in bonds for the first leg of a bullet-train system. But despite the state's dismal finances, groundwork on the planned 700-mile network is continuing with public review of the High Speed Rail Authority's draft program environmental impact report.

Translation: This is the time for residents, as well as cities and counties, to give their two cents on route, alignment and station locations. Drawing the most attention is jousting about the system's northern leg. The rail authority wants to route trains through Los Banos and into the South Bay via Pacheco Pass. Opponents say the authority should consider instead a route that goes through Modesto and drops into the Bay Area via Altamont Pass. There also are important but less publicized decisions ahead that will affect cities up and down Highway 99. Some of these choices -- such as where to place a job-producing maintenance station -- are pitting Fresno, Merced and other Valley cities against one another. Also to be determined is which cities will get high-speed stations and where those stations will be. Miller says high-speed rail should follow the rural Burlington Northern Santa Fe route through the Valley, not the Union Pacific route bordering Highway 99. He says this would prevent small towns along Highway 99 from being disrupted by the passage of as many as 200 high-speed trains a day. But there are cities -- Visalia, for example -- that want the Union Pacific alignment. Miller also says building a bypass loop to carry high-speed trains that don't stop in Fresno would enable the city to get rail consolidation without having to spend \$500 million for it. Thus far, Fresno officials have not asked the rail authority for a bypass loop. They should. Most important, say both Miller and Democratic state Sen. Dean Florez of Shafter, is for Valley stakeholders to take a regional view and speak with an unified voice. Says

Florez: "They need to settle their differences before the Legislature or the authority does." The columnist can be reached at bmcewen@fresnobee.com <<mailto:bmcewen@fresnobee.com>> or 441-6632.